

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center

Wildlife Damage Management, Internet Center for


4-1989

Wolf Population Survival in an Area of High Road Density

L. David Mech

USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, david_mech@usgs.gov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usgsnpwrc>

 Part of the [Animal Sciences Commons](#), [Behavior and Ethology Commons](#), [Biodiversity Commons](#), [Environmental Policy Commons](#), [Recreation, Parks and Tourism Administration Commons](#), and the [Terrestrial and Aquatic Ecology Commons](#)

Mech, L. David, "Wolf Population Survival in an Area of High Road Density" (1989). *USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center*. 378.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/usgsnpwrc/378>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Wildlife Damage Management, Internet Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in USGS Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Notes and Discussion

Wolf Population Survival in an Area of High Road Density

ABSTRACT.—Wolf mortality in a high-road-density area of Minnesota exceeds that in an adjacent wilderness, and is primarily human-caused. The wolf population there is maintained primarily by ingress from the adjacent wilderness areas. A road density of 0.58 km/km² can be exceeded and the area still support wolves if it is adjacent to extensive roadless areas.

INTRODUCTION

A primary source of wolf (*Canis lupus*) mortality is interactions with human beings. Wolves are hit by cars (DeVos, 1949; Mech, 1977; Berg and Kuehn, 1982) and shot and trapped illegally (Weise *et al.*, 1975; Robinson and Smith, 1977). Therefore they tend to survive where human density is low (Hendrickson *et al.*, 1975), and the density of roads passable by 2-wheel-drive vehicles is <0.58 km/km² (Thiel, 1985; Jensen *et al.*, 1986; Mech *et al.*, 1988). The present study examines wolf mortality in an area where road density exceeds 0.58 km/km² but that is adjacent to an extensive area having fewer roads.

STUDY AREA

The study area was a 975-km² region in the Superior National Forest just N of Isabella, Minnesota, with a road density averaging 0.73 km/km², including U.S. Forest Service Road types A, B and C (U.S. Forest Service, 1986). About 80% of the roads are impassable by vehicles during winter but all can be traveled by snowmobile. Immediately N is the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, a roadless region contiguous with the entire Canadian wolf population. In the other directions, the mean road density is lower than that of the study area.

The study area encompassed the territories of the Jackpine and Sawbill wolf packs as well as parts of three or four others (Mech, 1973, 1986). After October 1970, wolves on federal property, which comprised ≥90% of the land within the study area, were legally protected, and after August 1974 all wolves were protected. In winter the study area supported the only white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) for at least 20 km to the W, E and N. Deer are the major wolf prey in this area (Nelson and Mech, 1986).

METHODS

Wolves were radio-tagged from 1969 through 1986 and located at least weekly by aerial radio-tracking (Mech, 1974). Dead animals were examined for cause of death. I assumed that radio collars removed from wolves by humans represented animals killed by humans.

RESULTS

Seventy-one wolves were radio-tagged in the study area. Of those, eight are currently being monitored, 15 (21%) died of human causes, another 17 (24%) probably were killed by humans, and 17 died natural deaths. (The signals from 14 others were lost prematurely, which could have indicated radio failure, dispersal or additional human-caused mortality.) Thus, total known or probable mortality was 69%, most of which was known or probable human-caused. Some 60% of the human-caused mortality occurred after wolves were protected by the Endangered Species Act of 1973. In addition, nine radio-collared wolves from outside the study area immigrated there, and two of them were killed by humans, and four others probably were. At least one other member of an immigrating radio-collared pack was shot.

Dispersers caught elsewhere also used the area as part of their larger ranges (Mech and Frenzel, 1971; Mech, 1986), so they were exposed to the same mortality as resident wolves. They also could colonize the area (Rothman and Mech, 1979; Fritts and Mech, 1981). Of three breeders whose origins were known, two immigrated into the area.

Of 53 wolves radio-tagged just N of the study area during the same period, 22 emigrated from the roadless area, eight of which immigrated into the study area, at least one being shot there; four that immigrated to other accessible areas were also killed by humans. Causes of death are known for 10

wolves that remained in the roadless area, and all were natural. No human-caused mortality was discovered in the roadless area despite accessibility by hiking trail and canoe.

DISCUSSION

My study area had 26% more roads than other areas of similar habitat where wolves did not survive (Thiel, 1985; Jensen *et al.*, 1986; Mech *et al.*, 1988); yet it supported wolves throughout the study. These wolves sustained unusually high human-caused mortality, with survival below the threshold required to maintain a wolf population (Mech, 1970:63–64; Peterson *et al.*, 1984; Ballard *et al.*, 1987). Thus it appears that the main reason this area continued to support wolves was that it lay adjacent to regions of low road density.

I conclude (1) that the road-density threshold described by other studies applies most directly to areas not adjacent to large reservoirs of occupied wolf range, and (2) that relatively small areas of high road densities can sustain wolves so long as suitable roadless reservoirs are nearby.

Acknowledgments.—This study was funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. North Central Forest Experimental Station. I thank J. J. Renneberg, M. E. Nelson, G. Riley and various volunteers for field assistance, and T. K. Fuller for helpful suggestions on the manuscript.

LITERATURE CITED

- BALLARD, W. B., J. S. WHITMAN AND C. L. GARDNER. 1987. Ecology of an exploited wolf population in south-central Alaska. *Wildl. Monogr.* 98. 54 p.
- BERG, W. E. AND D. W. KUEHN. 1982. Ecology of wolves in north-central Minnesota, p. 4–11. In: F. H. Harrington and P. C. Paquet (eds.). *Wolves of the world*. Noyes Publ., Park Ridge, N.J.
- DEVOS, A. 1949. Timber wolves (*Canis lupus lycaon*) killed by cars on Ontario highways. *J. Mammal.*, 30:197.
- FRITTS, S. H. AND L. D. MECH. 1981. Dynamics, movements, and feeding ecology of a newly protected wolf population in northwestern Minnesota. *Wildl. Monogr.* 80. 43 p.
- HENDRICKSON, J., W. L. ROBINSON AND L. D. MECH. 1975. The status of the wolf in Michigan—1973. *Am. Midl. Nat.*, 94:226–232.
- JENSEN, W. F., T. K. FULLER AND W. L. ROBINSON. 1986. Wolf (*Canis lupus*) distribution on the Ontario-Michigan border near Sault Ste. Marie. *Can. Field-Nat.*, 100:363–366.
- MECH, L. D. 1970. The wolf: the ecology and behavior of an endangered species. Natural History Press, New York, N.Y. 384 p.
- . 1973. Wolf numbers in the Superior National Forest of Minnesota. *U.S. For. Serv. Res. Pap. NC-97*. 10 p.
- . 1974. Current techniques in the study of elusive wilderness carnivores. *Proc. XI Int. Congr. Game Biol.*, Stockholm, p. 315–322.
- . 1977. Productivity, mortality, and population trends of wolves in northeastern Minnesota. *J. Mammal.*, 58:559–574.
- . 1986. Wolf population in the central Superior National Forest, 1967–1985. *U.S. For. Serv. Res. Pap. NC-270*. 6 p.
- AND L. D. FRENZEL, JR. (EDS.). 1971. Ecological studies of the timber wolf in northeastern Minnesota. *U.S. For. Serv. Res. Pap. NC-52*. 62 p.
- , S. H. FRITTS, G. RADDE AND W. J. PAUL. 1988. Wolf distribution and road density in Minnesota. *Wildl. Soc. Bull.*, 16:85–87.
- NELSON, M. E. AND L. D. MECH. 1986. Deer population in the central Superior National Forest, 1967–1985. *U.S. For. Serv. Res. Pap. NC-271*. 7 p.
- PETERSON, R. O., J. D. WOLLINGTON AND T. N. BAILEY. 1984. Wolves of the Kenai Peninsula, Alaska. *Wildl. Monogr.* 88. 52 p.
- ROBINSON, W. L. AND G. J. SMITH. 1977. Observations on recently killed wolves in Upper Michigan. *Wildl. Soc. Bull.*, 5:25–26.
- ROTHMAN, R. J. AND L. D. MECH. 1979. Scent-marking in lone wolves and newly formed pairs. *Anim. Behav.*, 27:750–760.

- THIEL, R. P. 1985. The relationship between road densities and wolf habitat suitability in Wisconsin. *Am. Midl. Nat.*, **113**:404-407.
- U.S. FOREST SERVICE R-9. 1986. National forest roads for all uses. Eastern Region, Milwaukee, Wis. 53203. 17 p.
- WEISE, T. F., W. L. ROBINSON, R. A. HOOK AND L. D. MECH. 1975. An experimental translocation of the eastern timber wolf. *Audubon Conserv. Rep.* 5. 28 p.
- L. DAVID MECH,¹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Maryland 20708. *Submitted 10 June 1988; accepted 1 December 1988*

¹ Present address: North Central Forest Experiment Station, 1992 Folwell Ave., St. Paul, Minnesota 55108